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Transcript, "Weekend Edition"

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As Tea Party-backed Republicans demand deep cuts, negotiations have opened up the possibility of a centrist coalition that might pass a compromise budget. Guest host David Greene speaks to two House moderates, Republican Charlie Bass of New Hampshire, and "Blue-Dog" Democrat John Barrow of Georgia, about current budget negotiations.

DAVID GREENE, host: This is WEEKEND EDITION from NPR News. Im David Greene, sitting in for Liane Hansen.

It's T-minus five days for Congress to reach an agreement on funding the federal government. No deal, and the government will shut down. House Speaker John Boehner didn't sound so optimistic yesterday.

Representative JOHN BOEHNER (R-Ohio, Speaker): Now, you've heard Democrat leaders claim an agreement has been reached on this issue. But let me be clear: There is no agreement.

GREENE: Finding an agreement may force Boehner to choose between Tea Party conservatives, who want larger spending cuts than Democrats will swallow; and centrists, who might back a compromise - people like Republican Charlie Bass of New Hampshire.

Representative CHARLIE BASS (Republican, New Hampshire): If being a fiscal conservative makes me a centrist, that's fine. If understanding that the primary goal of this Congress is to get spending and the deficits under control, I'm happy to be a centrist.

GREENE: And also, perhaps, Georgia Democrat John Barrow, who says he's OK with the centrist label as well.

Representative JOHN BARROW (Democrat, Georgia): The trouble is, we are underrepresented in Congress, as our colleagues from more partisan districts are overrepresented in Congress. What I think we lack in numbers, I hope we can make up in leverage.

GREENE: We reached both of those members in their offices even as buzzers were going off behind them, calling them to floor votes. We talked about a compromise, floated by the White House, that would include \$33 billion in spending cuts.

I asked congressman Bass if he's under pressure from the Tea Party members in his party to support even deeper cuts.

Rep. BASS: Well, I'd like to suggest that I'm under an enormous amount of self-inflicted pressure to get the nation's spending under control. It's not necessarily about the Tea Party, or any other group.

The reason why this vote is perhaps more significant than others is, it sets the precedent for the rest of the year. I would suggest that getting to \$33 billion would be precedent-setting in and by itself. And it gives us the opportunity to get through the first hundred yards of what I would consider to be a marathon.

We have the debt-ceiling vote ahead of us. We have 11 appropriations ahead of us. We have the budget ahead of us. And so I believe that we ought to move this continuing resolution out as quickly as we possibly can, and get on with the bigger issues - which is going to be the budget for next year.

GREENE: Congressman Barrow, some of your party leaders - Vice President Joe Biden comes to the Hill, sort of dangles this idea of a \$33 billion cut as part of a deal to keep the government running. The vice president is from your party; is that an amount that you can live with, that you're ready for?

(Soundbite of buzzer)

Rep. BARROW: Well, it all depends on where it comes from. I'm for cuts - but I'm for smart cuts. A large part of the problem we're having is that we're focusing all of our attention on a very, very small part of what makes up our annual operating budget.

Two-thirds of the 3.6 trillion or so we spend every year - that we take in and spend - is entitlement spending, and that's off the table in the discussions we're having right now about how to fund the second half of just this fiscal year. Of the remaining third, about two-thirds of that is off the table because it's defense spending.

I'm all for cuts in getting our spending under control. But as long as we continue to focus on the part of the budget that's not the big problem, we're not going to have any real solution.

GREENE: Well, let me ask you: If this is not a big part of the problem - I mean, we are talking about a \$1.4 trillion deficit - I mean, if this is small potatoes, why not just say OK, let's take these cuts and move on to some of the bigger battles?

Rep. BARROW: Well, it's because the size cuts we're talking about have a disproportionate impact on the part of the government that a lot of folks, and a lot of industry, and a lot of businesses rely on. I'm sure the situation is same for Charlie in his district. But there are many interests in my part of the country that rely on things like the Cooperative Extension Program, our investment in research and development for agriculture, things like that. And whacking away at those isn't going to solve the nation's fiscal problems. But it is going to hurt business and industry all over the country.

GREENE: You both seem to suggest this is just the beginning of a long process that's dealing with relatively small amount of money. So I suppose a lot of this is sort of the stage-setting politics, a philosophical debate. Is that fair?

Rep. BASS: Well, David, I think that there are a lot of forces here that are unknown. We have

new leadership in the House. It's 80-some-odd new freshmen members of Congress. And I think this is part of the process of the leadership, and negotiators, trying to figure out what the mentality and priorities and so forth are, of a lot of new people.

GREENE: Do you mean that House Speaker John Boehner is sort of finding his ground in figuring out how to deal with this new Tea Party environment? Is that what you're saying?

Rep. BASS: Well, he has an enormous influx of new members of Congress, none of whom were around six months ago. And I think it's a process of trying to learn from them how willing they are to negotiate and work out solutions, versus being difficult - and pragmatism versus principle, I guess. And both are very important, I want to add.

But the leader needs to try to figure out what this delicate path is going to be. And I also believe that he will be attempting to solicit and communicate with moderate members of the Democratic Party, like my friend from Georgia.

GREENE: Well, congressman Barrow, let me ask you about the leader of your party. President Obama. Not incredibly popular at the moment, certainly among conservatives. Is it important for him to sort of stay on the sidelines at this point, to make sure not to push possible moderate Republicans away?

Rep. BARROW: It would be presumptuous of me to advise the president on how best to get involved in this. I know this - that we're not going to get anything done unless the Senate moves, and the order in which things happen is going to have to involve the Senate. My policy is to state up front that we need to get our deficit spending under control. All aspects of the federal budget need to be on the table. And until we approach it that way, we're not really going to get a handle on the problem.

GREENE: Congressman Bass, you come from an interesting perspective because you're a veteran; you actually lived through the government shutdown. And then you leave and come back to Congress now - as part of the new wave, so to speak. What advice do you have to members about what shutdowns can mean?

Rep. BASS: I was here in 1995. I was supportive of the government shutdown. In the end, I think we all discovered that even our allies lost respect for us because we didn't appear to be able to solve problems. I think there's a feeling that shutting down government somehow moves everybody to the edge, and makes people do things and compromise in a better fashion. But we didn't discover that in 1995. And in the end, those of us who supported the government shutdown really lost ground.

And I think that John Boehner, as speaker, remembers that. I remember that. I don't believe that those of us who believe in less spending, and balanced budgets and so forth, will necessarily be moving better toward that goal if we shut the government down. Because I think in the end, every body disrespects us for having done that.

GREENE: Let me ask you both for a one-word answer. Congressman Bass, is the government

going to shut down this Friday?

Rep. BASS: I think it's quite possible.

GREENE: Congressman Barrow?

Rep. BARROW: Possible.

GREENE: Both of you, thank you so much for being here.

That's congressman Charlie Bass, Republican of New Hampshire. Thank you for your time, sir.

Rep. BASS: Thank you, David.

GREENE: And congressman John Barrow, Democrat of Georgia, thank you.

Rep. BARROW: Thank you.